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Discourse and pragmatic markers in spoken and signed languages: functional and applied perspectives

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Not all levels of linguistic analysis are equal. From phonology to morpho-syntax and semantics there is a hierarchy of units, with rules constraining their combination and articulation. Discourse, which more often than not involves above-clause-level phenomena, is at the top of this hierarchy. It is where ideas and intentions assemble to give cohesion and coherence to a text or interaction. As Graesser et al. (1997: 164) put it, “Discourse is what makes us human, what allows us to communicate ideas, facts, and feelings across time and space.” Therefore, it is crucial to understand the expressions and mechanisms that speakers use to construct discourse in everyday language use.

Discourse is inextricably linked to pragmatics, which is concerned with the function of particular expressions with respect to the context in which they are used and the speakers who use them to convey messages beyond the explicit or literal meaning of words. To master pragmatic competence is to know how to use different forms of language in different contexts and with different populations. As is well-known, we “do things with words” (Austin, 1962), and pragmatics is therefore at the core of every interaction.

This Special Issue focuses on a category of linguistic expressions that brings together discourse and pragmatics, namely “discourse markers” (Schiffrin, 1987), also called “pragmatic markers” (Brinton, 1996) or “discourse particles” (Fischer, 2000). Although different terms have been associated with slightly different definitions, the core features shared by the expressions grouped under these umbrella terms include that they are optional, loosely integrated expressions with a procedural meaning (Schourup, 1999). Discourse markers typically include expressions also used as adverbials such as *so* and *well* or verb phrases like *I mean* and *you know*, whose main function is to connect utterances to each other and to the larger context. In this special issue, we do not commit to one terminological preference over another, given that the choice between “discourse” and “pragmatic” is not trivial and is based on differences in linguistic traditions, the types of expressions analysed, and/or the research questions posed. Notwithstanding, for the purposes of this special issue, Hansen’s (2006: 28) distinction between the two options offers a rationale for the choice of one term over the other:

Discourse marker should be considered a hyponym of *pragmatic marker*, the latter being a cover term for all those non-propositional functions which linguistic items may fulfil in discourse. Alongside discourse markers, whose main purpose is the maintenance of what I have called “transactional coherence”, this overarching category of functions would include various forms of interactional markers, such as markers of politeness, turn-taking etc. whose aim is the maintenance of interactional coherence; performance markers, such as hesitation markers; and possibly others.

As Hansen's explanation suggests, authors may use the term "discourse markers" when they want to stress the relational, connective functions of the markers, while others may opt for "pragmatic markers" in order to stress their interactional, speech management functions. The former term often overlaps with the related category of "connectives", which has oftentimes been used in studies on written discourse, where the same expressions are more restricted to coherence relations (cause, contrast, etc.) rather than topic-structuring or turn-taking functions (e.g. Georgakopoulou & Goutsos, 1998: 888; Crible, 2017: 103). By contrast, the term "pragmatic marker" often comprises categories such as interjections (*oh*) and filled pauses (*uh*), and is much more specific to studies on spoken language, where such items are profuse. Both types of markers are investigated in the studies presented in this Special Issue, in which the following items are investigated: *actually*, *in fact* (Buysse), the signs PALM-UP and SAME (Gabarró-López), *uh* (Davis & Maclagan), and broader selections of markers such as *because*, *however*, *and*, *for example*, *like* or *I mean* in Ament et al. and in Crible and Pascual.

Discourse and pragmatic markers are not exclusive to writing and speech, nor are they only used in certain languages or by particular populations. They have been documented in many typologically unrelated languages from all language groups (e.g. Amazonian Kichwa, Grzech, 2016; Kinshasa Lingala, Nzoimbengene, 2016). They have also been investigated in the language used by various speaker groups, including second language learners and speakers whose language may be affected by a disorder or impairment such as autism, aphasia, or dementia (cf. Davis & Maclagan, this issue). However, such markers have received far less attention in the field of sign language linguistics, where discourse studies remain very rare (cf. Gabarró-López, this issue). This Special Issue includes studies on spoken and signed languages and across various speaker groups, and is thus quite representative of the community of researchers studying discourse markers.

In addition to this broad coverage of data, all the papers in this issue combine two perspectives on discourse and pragmatic markers: a functional approach, whereby the expressions are not only investigated quantitatively but also qualitatively; and an applied approach, relating empirical results to real-world applications. We believe it is important to expand our understanding of not only the forms of these markers, but also their many functions, which make this category both interesting and challenging to researchers in pragmatics and discourse analysis. The relevance of applied perspectives requires no justification, at a time when research needs to be better integrated into society. Both approaches are briefly reviewed below.

Discourse and pragmatic markers are primarily a functional category, that is, they are not only defined by formal features, but also largely by the type of function or meaning-in-context that they can express. As a result, broad discourse and pragmatic functions are often mentioned in the literature, including, for instance, that discourse markers "bracket units of talk" (Schiffrin, 1987: 31) or "constrain the relevance of the proposition they introduce by indicating that it stands in a particular relation to the one most recently processed" (Blakemore, 1987: 247). However, more fine-grained approaches are necessary to understand the intricate layers of meaning that discourse markers can activate in language use. To this end, several frameworks have been proposed, ranging from three or four broad macro-categories (e.g. Cuenca, 2013) to detailed hierarchical inventories of function labels (e.g. Prasad et al., 2018). While it is beyond the scope of this introduction to review all of them, we will focus on a particular line of work which is central to several papers in this issue, namely, the "discourse domains" or "levels of discourse structure approach", as first proposed by Redeker (1990).

Redeker (1990) introduced the idea that discourse markers can function at several levels of discourse structure in different contexts. More specifically, they can relate different types of elements, at different levels of discourse structure, thus performing different macro-functions. She originally identified three domains: the ideational structure, which is concerned with real-world events (e.g. the marker *because* connects a result to its objective cause); the rhetorical structure, which targets epistemic and speech-act relations (e.g. *therefore* introduces a conclusion to an argument); and the sequential structure, which deals with higher-level structure such as topics and turn exchange. This proposal resonates with Halliday's (1970) general model of the ideational, textual, and interpersonal functions of language. It was complemented by González (2005), who defined specific functions within Redeker's three domains, and added a fourth "inferential" component, which contains functions related to the speaker-hearer relationship, including the use of pragmatic markers to constrain possible inferences and presuppositions in light of cognitive factors such as shared knowledge or assumptions of common ground (see Davis & MacLagan, this issue; see also González, 2004). A similar approach to that of discourse domains is taken by the Val.Es.Co model of speech segmentation (Briz & Val.Es.Co, 2014; see Crible & Pascual, this issue) and by Crible (2017) for corpus annotation (see Gabarró-López, this issue). By comparing the use of discourse and pragmatic markers along these lines, it becomes possible to understand the main roles of these expressions in different contexts, thus revealing whether they are mainly used to connect facts, to express the speaker's subjectivity, to structure the discourse flow, or to manage the speaker-hearer relationship.

Besides functional approaches to discourse and pragmatic markers, some authors have also adopted a more applied perspective towards the study of these expressions, so as to use their findings for socially relevant purposes. Among the vast range of applications using discourse knowledge, we can mention machine translation, which benefits from discourse annotated corpora (Meyer & Popescu-Belis, 2012), language therapy, where patterns of discourse use can serve as a diagnostic tool (e.g. Duboisindien et al., 2019), or language learning and teaching. The latter is probably the area where most applied work on discourse markers has been carried out, with several studies comparing their use by native and non-native speakers (Aijmer, 2011; Buysse, 2017; Götz, 2013) or testing the effect of naturalistic language input (Gilquin, 2016; see also Ament et al., this issue).

This special issue also addresses questions regarding translation, second language acquisition, pedagogy, and language pathology. While there are several applied studies on written texts, and many descriptive studies on spoken texts, the combination of functional and applied approaches in spoken and signed languages vouches for the innovation of this issue and the valuable contribution of each of its papers. In what follows, we summarize the content of the special issue, grouping papers by type of applied perspective.

Starting with acquisition studies, **Lieven Buysse** offers a careful account of two pragmatic markers, *actually* and *in fact*, in native-speaker English and the non-native English of French- and Dutch-speaking learners. *Actually* and *in fact* are both described as adversative markers signalling counter-expectation, with an additional elaborative function (introducing a new topic, a detail, or a clarification). They both have high-frequency equivalents in the learners' mother tongue (*eigenlijk* and *in feite* in Dutch, and *en fait* in French), which could explain differences between the two learner groups and between learners and native speakers. Buysse first compares the frequency of *actually* and *in fact* in the Dutch and Belgian French

components of the LINDSEI database of spoken learner English (Gilquin et al., 2010) and in the mirror native LOCNEC corpus (De Cock, 2004). He finds that both the Dutch-speaking learners and the native British speakers use *actually* much more frequently than *in fact*, whereas the French-speaking learners behave differently, implementing *in fact* much more often than *actually*. He then proceeds to a qualitative functional analysis of the two markers and uncovers eight categories of functions, grouped into three over-arching functions, namely, the adversative function to emphasise reality, counterexpectation, or contradiction; elaboration for reinforcement, to mark a noteworthy comment or a topic shift, or for reformulation or restarting an utterance; and, thirdly, for learner-specific uses. Although there are no major functional differences between speaker groups, Buysse's main finding is that the learners' preferred marker in the target language reflects the status of its cognate in the mother tongue, with Dutch-speaking learners using *actually* very frequently (similarly to native speakers), while French-speaking learners prefer *in fact*, thus mirroring *eigenlijk* and *en fait*, respectively. Buysse concludes by promoting studies on multiple pragmatic markers in order to obtain a more complete picture of the learners' lexicon and the equivalences in their mother tongue.

Jennifer Ament, Julia Barón Pares, and Carmen Pérez Vidal provide another acquisition study on pragmatic markers, covering a wider range of expressions termed "textual pragmatic markers". The focus of their paper is to compare the distribution and functions of these expressions across native speakers and learners in English-medium instruction, either in full or semi-immersion contexts, as determined by the number of classes taught to the learners in English or in their first language, Spanish. The authors adopt a functional pragmatic approach, drawing a major distinction between interpersonal and textual uses, and for the latter, eight sub-functions are identified: causal, contrastive, continuation, elaboration, opening and closing, sequential, topic shift/digression, and summary/conclusion. The methodology includes a language background questionnaire, a proficiency test, a monologue, and an interaction task. Ament et al. find that third-year immersion students produce the largest amount of pragmatic markers, followed by native speakers and second-year immersion students. Second-year students also differ with regard to the most frequent function performed by the pragmatic markers, namely, continuation, cause, and topic shift, as opposed to continuation, elaboration, and cause being the most frequent functions of the markers used by both third-year students and native speakers. Some functions (e.g. continuation, elaboration) are used more frequently by third-year and native students than by second-years. It thus appears that longer exposure to English-medium instruction is beneficial for the use of pragmatic markers, as the third-year students of English resemble native speakers more so than the second-year students do. Some functions of the pragmatic markers used by the learners are particularly close to native-like use, which the authors explain in terms of several factors, including the transparency of the markers and the frequency of these functions in the input the learners receive. They conclude that varying the contexts of exposure to pragmatic markers might be most beneficial for language learners.

Still pursuing pedagogical applications, but from a more cross-linguistic standpoint, **Ludvine Crible and Elena Pascual** report on patterns of combination between discourse markers, repairs, and repetitions in native spoken English, French, and Spanish. By combining a functional approach to discourse markers (distinguishing between propositional, textual, and interpersonal uses) with a structural approach to repairs (following Levelt, 1983), the authors aim at disentangling "fluent" from "disfluent" uses of discourse markers (i.e. discourse markers

that often occur outside repairs versus repetition and markers that often signal a repair). They annotate samples of conversational data and report on the distribution of discourse markers with and without repetitions, both within and outside repairs. The authors find that the most frequent discourse markers are very similar across languages in form and function, with mostly textual uses. Repetitions are more frequent in Spanish than in the other two languages, whereas discourse markers are more varied in the two Romance languages than they are in English. Additionally, most repairs include at least one discourse marker and/or repetition. There is also one repair-specific marker in each language, namely, English *or*, French *ou* ‘or’, and Spanish *digamos* ‘let’s say’. In the editing phase of repairs, discourse markers are mostly reformulative (thus carrying out a textual function) and much more restricted in form and function than in other positions or outside repairs. Crible and Pascual’s main finding is the distinction between pervasive versus repair-specific reformulation markers (e.g. *o sea* ‘that is’ vs. *digamos* in Spanish). The appendices can also serve as pedagogical tools to provide authentic examples to language learners and teachers illustrating “fluent” and “disfluent” uses of high-frequency markers.

Sílvia Gabarró-López offers the second cross-linguistic study of this special issue, this time comparing two discourse markers in two sign languages (Catalan Sign Language, or LSC, and French Belgian Sign Language, or LSFB). These minority languages are used in Spain and in French-speaking Belgium by native or near-native deaf signers. The two signs are *PALM-UP*, which is also a co-speech gesture and is highly polyfunctional, and *SAME*, which means both similarity and comparison. Gabarró-López annotates their functions in conversational samples from video corpora and compares their distribution across sign languages and age groups (two speakers below 30, two between 30 and 49, and two 50 years of age or older in each language). She finds that the relative frequency and functional spectrum of each discourse marker is similar across languages: *PALM-UP* is the most polyfunctional marker of the two (especially in LSFB), with punctuation, monitoring, agreeing, and closing uses; *SAME* is mostly rhetorical (reformulation, specification), with the extra function of addition in LSFB. No age differences were observed for *PALM-UP* in both languages. However, older signers in both languages used *SAME* less frequently than the younger groups. Education level also appears as a potentially relevant factor in the extent to which signers are able to produce argumentative discourse, especially in LSFB, which then calls for more explicit teaching of such pragmatic competencies for schooled signers.

Lastly, **Boyd Davis and Margaret Maclagan** present a longitudinal case study of the filled pause *uh* used as a pragmatic marker by a speaker with mild to moderate Alzheimer’s disease in order to study the evolution of language competencies through aging and dementia. Conversational interactions between the subject and a researcher, which took place over six years, were recorded and analysed for the presence and functions of *uh*. The filled pause was found to perform functions from all four of González’s (2005) domains (ideational, rhetorical, sequential, inferential), attesting to its status as a pragmatic marker, beyond a mere hesitation phenomenon. Its functions vary according to the setting (identity of the addressee, type of topic, quality of the interaction), with uses related to (im)politeness and interaction management. Inferential uses of *uh* (justifying, mitigating, resultative) decreased as dementia strengthened, whereas its use for delaying whilst trying to find a word increased. Davis and Maclagan conclude that *uh* displays full-fledged pragmatic functions of proximity and inferencing, and becomes used as a compensatory strategy when the disease progresses. They suggest that such

qualitative exploration of pragmatic markers can allow us to distinguish between pathological and non-pathological language use.

Overall, the five papers in this special issue offer an overview of applied approaches to discourse and pragmatic markers, focusing on the many functions of these polysemous expressions in a variety of spoken and sign languages. They all coincide in advocating for more fine-grained qualitative analyses of such expressions with the goal of seeking real-world applications.

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